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VOLUNTARY READING IN THE ENGLISH HIGH SCHOOL

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What the English High School of Providence has to present resembles the crude physics notebook of our pupils—observations heterogeneous, formulæ uncertain, conclusions or inferences scanty and perhaps illogical. More than the classical high school, though perhaps not so much as the elementary school, an English high school is “of the people and for the people.” In its catechism the “chief end” of boy and girl is not college. The small proportion which it sends to college does not influence much the tone of the school or the plans of the teachers. That “chief end” is directly, and not through the college, culture and self-support. To our short-sighted pupils and their parents the aim of culture, which includes our topic today, often seems opposed to the aim of self-support. The influence of our commercial department, too, in spite of its broad-minded management, is against culture. In our school are the girl whose mother cannot read or write in any language; foreigners who never hear intelligible English at home; the stunted little fellow who carries telegrams till midnight; the sleepy boy who was up at half-past four driving a milk-wagon; the delicate girl who is both housekeeper and nursery maid at home; the little chief cook of the family; the boy whose father brings home every night a “yellow journal;” the boy who does not own a single good book; the girls who are receiving from their mother, one by one, for Christmas and birthday gifts, a set of Mary Jane Holmes or of Elsie Dinsmore. Those who go to college from accident and impulse, not from home influence. Our pupils have no inheritance of culture; nor, indeed, does their future promise more than their past.

Except for the small college class and the girls who, after a year and a half or two years of Normal training, become teachers in the ele-

¹ Read at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of English in New England, November, 1904.

mentary schools, our pupils at graduation leave behind the world of study. They are now to deal, not with books, except account-books, but with machines, with customers, with kitchen furniture, fancy work, and chafing-dishes. These conditions the teachers in an English high school accept, and to them fit their expectations and aims. There must be a place for the youth of the rising classes. That place is evidently the English high school. Its work has an interest, a pathos, a reward, and a humor, all its own.

Because our material is what it is, our experiments will seem to the college-preparatory teacher to be on a low plane, just as methods proposed and recorded by them seem to us above our level. At the beginning of each year we spend in our school some time in getting acquainted with our material, a diverting occupation. We give sets of questions like the following: (1) How much time each week do you spend in reading for pleasure? (2) What books have you read during the summer vacation (or during the past year)? Mark with a cross those you like best. (3) What magazines do you read (*a*) usually? (*b*) Sometimes? (4) How much time each day do you spend in reading the new paper?

Of course, we know what sort of answers to expect; but we work better with the facts fresh before us, the answers further our acquaintance with individuals, and they vary, from year to year, enough to justify the repeated investigation. Five or six years ago Mrs. Holmes, Pansy, and E. P. Roe led the third-year lists. They still have followers, and Rosa Carey remains popular, but there is now an excess of recent historical fiction, such as "When Knighthood Was in Flower" and "The Crisis," and of the latest popular book a little behind time, whether it be "Lovey Mary" or "Elizabeth and Her German Garden."

The answers point to a few general conclusions: The second year (among the girls) is the transition from boys' books and boarding-school tales to the aforesaid historical romances. The boys during this year outgrow their adored Henty for Scott, Dumas, Stevenson, and Conan Doyle, if indeed these young business men and ball-players find time for any reading. The girls read more than the boys.

The lists are often encouraging. Almost all of my third-year class this year report some good, rather old, books. Shakespeare,

Robinson Crusoe, *Tom Brown*, and *John Halifax*, *Jane Eyre* and *Lorna Doone*, are well distributed; as are books by Miss Austen, George Eliot, Thackeray, Dickens, and Stevenson, Mrs. Stowe, Miss Alcott, Miss Jewett, and Mrs. Wiggin. More interesting than the lists, because less stereotyped, are compositions entitled "My Library," wherein you may be told what books your pupil owns, how she obtained them, which she likes best, whether she has a bookcase of her own or only a shelf in the family bookcase, and whether she dusts them herself. "Books of my Childhood" is a good subject, too, for those who have kept from "the dim past," as they call it—the dingy and torn little volumes. Both lists and compositions awake in the pupil a consciousness in the matter of reading, if not a conscientiousness.

The tastes and habits of our pupils being somewhat clear to us, we formulate to ourselves our aims for these young readers: more reading, but not too much; better books; independence in reading; the library habit and the buying habit.

Most boys and girls are so constituted that when teachers say, "Read *The Rivals*," they do not read it. Some of them have the intention, but carrying it out means keeping the name in mind until they go to the library, finding the name in the card catalogue, and finding the book "in" when they ask for it. Usually, then, as the sole result of this mention in class, the pupil has a vague impression the next time he hears of the book, that he has heard of it before. The impression is clearer if the names of the book and the author are written on the board and copied in notebooks. In most cases that ends the matter; after examination the notebook is discarded. There are instances to the contrary, but discouragingly few. The testimony of teachers indicates that posted lists are consulted by seniors, less by third-year pupils, hardly at all by entering pupils. Lists are probably more effective when the title is followed by a brief characterization or outline of the book, such as a publisher introduces into his advertisement. To my third-year questions this fall I added: "What books have you *ever* read because they were recommended in school?" Only six out of forty-six had none to report. The usual numbers are one, two, and three, occasionally five or six. These include such works as *Ramona*, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Waverly*,

The Abbot, prose by Holmes, and poetry by Longfellow and Tennyson. "Recommended" probably means, in many of these cases, more than merely mentioned in class. *Ivanhoe* and *Kenilworth*, for instance, are given by many, but when these are not actually required, they are put into the hands of all pupils and recommended in such a way that the reading of them can hardly be called "voluntary."

One of our teachers of first-year English has attained success by accident. Limited as to copies, she furnished the boys of the division with *The Pilot*, and the girls with *The House of the Seven Gables*, letting each section report to the class on its own book. As a result the girls wished to read *The Pilot*, and the boys *The House of the Seven Gables*. Their interest encouraged the teacher to borrow from the public library twenty volumes of Hawthorne and Cooper which are now in lively circulation.

One device I have never found to fail of immediate effect, though it may not aid in forming the habit of the initiative in reading. If I bring in a book to which I wish to introduce the class, read to them one or two wily selections, then offer to lend the book, they all want to borrow it. After I had read aloud the fight between Tom Brown and the slugger, every boy in that second-year class was eager and anxious. I had only one copy, but I lent it; the school now possesses fifty copies. A judicious selection from *Scottish Chiefs*, *Men of Iron*, brought to terms a queer lot of boys who had prided themselves on their indifference to anything I might plan for their entertainment. By a similar judicious display of sample goods I have circulated Lanier's *Knightly Legends* and *The Boys' King Arthur*, Lang's *The Book of Romance*, Kingsley's *Hereward*, and *Westward Ho!* and with more moderate enthusiasm *Marjorie Fleming* and *Rab and His Friends*, *Judith Shakspeare*, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, and *Old Miracle Plays*; and by the same method I could circulate, I am convinced, whatever fit books I should read from, in far larger numbers than I have time to select or means to provide. We need a public school Carnegie. A book in the hand is worth two in the stack. A school library may increase tenfold the influence of the school upon the pupils' reading—a library with many duplicate copies, a loan library, with a librarian, and

with easy reading in foreign languages, as well as our own. The public library does for us all that it can. On our teachers' "books" we may take out twenty volumes at a time, which we may keep for three months, if they are not called for in the meantime. The library is near the group of high schools, and pupils sent with names of books desired come back with those volumes which happen to be "in." The library has provided itself with many duplicate copies of certain books, suited, however, to the lower schools especially; and any teacher, by sending an order to the purchasing agent of the school board, may have such books delivered by express at the school-house. But upon a city library there are many demands; and many times, with the best efforts of the librarians, who call in for us the books we wish, we cannot for weeks get what we need.

A novel report comes from the Barrington High School. There the pupils from the little town and the surrounding farms, are utterly without the reading habit, except in a pernicious form. Each pupil is required to read ten good books a year, giving proof by writing, first, reviews, and later, outlines. The town library is in the school building, and after school teacher and pupil together select there a book which the pupil will like. This is ideal—the library, the boy, the devoted teacher, and a leisure hour. The influence has extended to the parents; and we are expecting a coterie of Gibbons and Goethes from Barrington.

Better than the school library or public library is a library of one's own. The affection recorded by our pupils for their little collections is touching and cheering. One of my girls says: "Each week my books are dusted carefully. While I am doing this I often open them and read two or three of the first pages of some of them which I have forgotten." Another: "Many pleasant hours have I spent with my book. I think, if I had my choice between a day's pleasure trip and a good book, that I would choose the book." And another: "The pride of my heart is a dear little red-leather *Sketch Book*. The book-mark is always placed so that I can turn at once to the description of the organ in Westminster Abbey. I think that is one of the most beautiful and realistic passages that I have ever read."

Now we should like to add to these small libraries books of our own choosing, to divert the dollars spent on sets of *Elsie* into purer

channels. And here we have a grudge against the free textbooks, otherwise so valuable. In our time we were sure of having bits of standard literature in the readers we had to buy. Nowadays good authors are not inmates of the schoolboy's home; they are only flitting visitors. The only remedy is to persuade pupils or parents to buy these books. This some of us felt so strongly that last year we drew up an appeal to parents. After impartially admitting the convenience of having textbooks free, we pointed out the greater advantage of owning them. We said:

A book once known becomes a friend. If you own the book, you have your friend with you for help and companionship. Parents and teachers may together encourage a boy or girl to collect a library of good books. Believing this, we make the following suggestions:

1. Find out what books your child wants most, and give these books to him for birthday and Christmas gifts.
2. Encourage him to spend his own money for books.
3. Read his books, talk with him about them, and let him read to you.

While the reading of the best new books is not to be discouraged, these old books cost less and become more highly prized as the years go by. They are used in high schools throughout the United States. They make a good foundation for any library.

We were to accompany this letter by lists of books required in our study of English literature, and by lists of supplementary reading. We thought of sending these lists to the booksellers and department stores of the city, so that we could promise the parents the certainty of finding there what we recommended. An experienced normal-school teacher, when consulted, expressed approval of the plan. Then it was read to a lawyer and his wife who had a large family of children in school. "What would you think if you should receive this letter?" I asked. When I had finished it, Mrs. Jones said emphatically: "Well! I should think it *very queer*?" Mr. Jones said nothing, but looked every inch the lawyer. We did not send the circular. We still think the idea practical, if a wording can be invented to express more truly our feelings, which are neither patronizing nor arrogant.

My entering class of girls last year resolved itself, every Friday, into a reading club. Each girl who had read any book during the week reported, telling briefly what it was about and how she liked

it. We all took down in our notebooks the names which I did not veto. Before I dared to pass judgment on some books, I had to borrow them. L. T. Meade's boarding-school girls and Oliver Optic's remarkable young gentlemen were new acquaintances to me. The girls lent their books willingly to me and to their classmates; several good books went the rounds; not a few were sought at the public library with some success; one or two were received by request, as birthday gifts. The club method was effective, but it was on a plane a little too low. We did not work out of the boarding-school stories as entirely as we ought. Still, another class might, of itself, seek a higher level, and the teacher could use more upward pressure. The same plan was tried in a second-year class, but without response. Few read, fewer still reported. The method which succeeds with one class will not succeed with the next, for classes differ in personality as individuals differ. The teacher of English literature must forever experiment. She may not rest on her oars, saying with satisfaction: "At last I have developed a method." She must always feel her way, willing to give up a half-developed scheme, to retract, to change her mind, to invent methods hitherto unheard of, to adopt methods hitherto rejected.

The pupils' answers report an appalling number of fiction magazines. In no way is reading-time so frittered as on the storiettes which give a nourishment as brief and unsubstantial as the steam from the soup kettle. Nor is the magazine habit cured by years, like the Henty and Elsie habits; a humiliating proportion of intelligent American adults read nothing else. The average given in the April leaflet on voluntary reading of four periodicals to a pupil I find rather low than high. Perhaps it is raised by my newsboy who makes the most of his opportunities and reads for nothing several fashion journals before he delivers them to his female customers.

There is a legitimate use of the magazines. Possibly if the best periodicals were available in a school library, and certain valuable articles were brought to the attention, not so much poor fiction would be selected. As to the newspapers, among the answers this year was the following: "My main hold in reading is the newspaper and every interesting account of anything I cut out and save. In later years I propose to have them all united into a scrapbook." The

conclusions of the April leaflet of this association are: "There is not enough reading of the daily newspapers by many," and "there is excessive reading of daily newspapers by some, and unintelligent reading of them by many." Unintelligent the reading no doubt is, but in a third-year division of fifty, about one-third average fifteen minutes daily, one-third half an hour—surprisingly sensible averages. Only five or six read more than that, only one reads not at all. Seven read occasionally. Pupils may be trained to read the newspaper wisely by giving a few minutes of some history recitations to the reporting of current events. This plan may result in a journal or two being brought into the schoolroom, and in a wild scramble on the part of friends and neighbors through its columns. Connection is often visible between current events and the history we are studying. Labor troubles happened as long ago as the Black Death; and when the Archbishop of Canterbury came to Boston, we were glad that we knew how he and not another came to be the head of the English church. One of our Providence papers published one morning lately a comparison of the siege of Port Arthur with those of Carthage, Rome, and Constantinople. Regardless of correlation, I have encouraged items scientific or local; on successful air-ships, color photography, the securing of Boston symphony concerts for our city, the loan exhibit by American artists at our School of Design. This is a course in general information, in "knowing something about everything." Pupils who may not have taken kindly to history are revealed in a new light—wide-awake, mature in judgment, thoughtful, original; for reporting leads often to discussion of a length which would be impossible in a class obliged to cover certain hundreds of pages within certain days. It may be that the course in current events is a privilege peculiar to an English high school.

In unresponsive classes activity may be induced by giving out general topics to individuals or, better, to sections. Half of the room for example, was one day to be prepared on foreign news, the other half on home news. The next day the arrangement was reversed and the stimulus of the harmless rivalry was evident. I confess that I have never yet succeeded in arousing the majority of a class to bringing in items habitually, but those who do not speak, listen. Maps, blackboard diagrams of military positions, general explana-

tions by the teacher, are helpful. It means that I must rise early in the morning and scan the news columns before breakfast, that I may supplement and revise the items reported. Sometimes my items are the only ones, but there is a gradual increase in the number of reporters.

What we must mainly depend upon to develop so strong a liking for good literature that it shall govern voluntary reading, is the regular class study laid down in the daily schedule. It is by the intensive study of masterpieces that the critical faculty is trained for practical use. Every other piece of literature looks different after such a study. Even though it cause some temporary weariness, the permanent result is good. I do not believe that the "double life in things literary" goes on forever, if the class study of good things is at all what it may be. These experiments in voluntary reading are only supplements, to be worked in as time and occasion allow. No college examinations, no precedent, no theories of others or our own, no poverty of material can acquit us, after four years of daily contact in the classroom, for the failure to develop, in most of our pupils, the elementary knowledge of good and evil in things literary, and the embryo passion for the good.

DISCUSSION

Alfred H. Hitchcock, of the Public High School, Hartford, Conn., said, among other things:

1. The increasingly common practice of making the English recitation merely a pleasant hour devoted primarily to discussing cheap favorites has many real dangers. There is, of course, a tendency to aim too high; yet it should be remembered that real enjoyment, real appreciation, rarely comes save through labor. The student of literature, like the student of any other art, must work.

2. To say that with one or two exceptions the present college requirements are absurdly inappropriate is hardly respectful to the college professors and the hundreds of high-school teachers who sanction them. It may take years of experimenting to find the best way of presenting the *Conciliation Speech* and Milton's lyrics; it certainly requires more skill to handle the Milton lyrics than it does to play with the works of G. A. Henty. Not only must pupils work; teachers must work too.

3. Those who recommend the abolishment of the present college requirements, and the substitution of much easier and inferior classics to be studied in a wholly agreeable way, show very little faith in the ability of the average teacher to make his work profitable, and still less faith in the hardihood of the average pupil. A love for literature which can be blighted by the *Conciliation Speech* or the *Essay on Milton* is hardly worth coddling.

I wish to take advantage of this opportunity to submit for consideration a plan for relating voluntary reading to the pupil's individuality.

What the pupil is asked to do: (1) Make a list of five topics on which he thinks he or some other member of the class might be able to write entertainingly. (2) Give the titles of five books he has read and is willing to recommend to his mates. (3) Describe, in a single paragraph, one of the books recommended. (4) Write an 800-word composition on one of the topics he has suggested or on one of twenty-five selected by the instructor from all the topics mentioned by the class.

What the teacher does: (1) Through studying book list, topic list, book review, and composition, he tries to find the boy—the individual. (2) Having corrected the composition and complimented its good points, he adds a few lines regarding the pupil's reading, if possible praising the list of books submitted, never condemning it in a cutting way, and suggests a few volumes, found in other lists, which may prove enjoyable. (3) To supplement this individual prescription, he gives to the entire class an informal yet serious talk on the dangers of too much promiscuous reading, and calls attention to perhaps twenty good books recommended by various members.

Professor Winter, of Harvard College, chairman of the Committee on the Establishment of Local Conferences for Special Work, made the following report:

This committee offers a report in favor of establishing local sections or conferences for special work.

It is the idea of the committee that such sections, or "shop clubs," serving as rallying centers for teachers, may be a means of accomplishing some definite work, and may, in several ways, be of advantage to the association. They therefore recommend that local sections be formed by members of the association, for systematic work in such subjects as each section may choose; that such members as approve of this and are willing to act, hand in their names, today, to the president of the association; that he choose from this number persons who shall undertake to act as starters or leaders in the localities represented; that these leaders, in the name of the association, invite persons, who may or may not be association members, to become members of these sections or clubs, and that these clubs be con-

ducted, with regular meetings for a given time, with the view to a specific work, and according to a specific plan.

In the case of certain of the subjects suggested, it may be advisable—for securing definite results—that some system of criticism be adopted for the work of each meeting. It is hoped that the possible social features of such meetings, as well as the intellectual fellowship of them, may be additional recommendations.

A report of the results of the undertaking—at the annual meeting—if such sections are formed, is regarded as desirable. The interest of the committee has been directed especially to the subject of oral reading. They wish strongly to emphasize their belief in the value of oral work in connection with the teaching of English. They believe that this work, done in this connection, is the best means of teaching English speech, and that it contributes materially, in ways that are well understood, to effective instruction in written English. The question is seriously raised as to whether substantially all the energy and means now given to occasional—oftentimes harmful—exercises in declamation, might not better be devoted to systematic instruction, by simple and natural methods, in oral English, alongside the instruction in written English.

The committee, therefore, especially recommends, as possibly a step in increasing interest in this subject, the formation of local sections for oral reading. As a help to this end, a program has been drawn up, and printed in the form of an association leaflet, intended as a suggestion for some effective scheme of work.

[After luncheon, Professor Winter explained this program with demonstrative readings to an interested audience. Over fifty members of the association have volunteered for active service in local sections, and “starters” have been appointed in Boston, Worcester, Framingham.]